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SUBJECT: ELECTION EXPERTS SHARE VIEWS ON FTA AND ELECTIONS

REF: SEOUL 985

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a luncheon meeting with the Ambassador, a pollster, an ex-spokesperson for presidential candidate Chung Mong-joon, a political consultant and a professor shared their views of the current political landscape in Korea and on the factors that would determine the outcome of December's presidential election. One theme in the discussion was how Korea had changed politically in the past five years. In the 2002 elections, President Roh was elected because people wanted to see change in the government and because anti-American sentiment was running high. In the 2007 election, the majority of voters would focus on the economy and particularly whether the next president could lay out a vision that would make Korea an advanced country. A secondary concern was peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. In 2002, Korea was not a big player in global markets whereas today it demanded the respect of world economies. Based on this perspective, Korea would elect the candidate who people think most deftly could merge political savvy with economic principles.

¶2. (C) Although the guests' views varied when asked who was the most likely candidate to win the presidential election, they all agreed that President Roh would continue to play a very active role in the presidential election. Roh was likely to support a progressive candidate who was best suited to go head-to-head with the GNP candidate. Roh's currently high levels of support are a result of perceived decisiveness and leadership on difficult issues (OPCON and FTA) and less on any policy choice or particular outcome from those decisions. The FTA was not likely to play a considerable role in determining the next president of Korea, and neither would a North-South summit. END SUMMARY.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

¶3. (C) Political consultant and leading political commentator Park Sung-min portrayed the political landscape in Korea as driven by Korea's desire to be respected. In 2002, Korean voters were upset because they did not feel the world respected Korea or its place in the world economy and that the U.S. did not handle the school-girl incident well. Now that Korea's economy was the 11th largest in the world, Koreans were more satisfied with their standing. Agreeing to receive wartime operational control (OPCON) and protecting

rice and other sensitive areas during the FTA negotiations further supported Koreans' belief that Korea was being taken seriously by the U.S. Polling firm President Hong Hyung-sik agreed with Park that Korea finally had enough confidence in its ability to compete in global markets. President Roh's resurgent popular support reflected the belief among Koreans that they have arrived on the global scene whereas previous low levels of support marked dissatisfaction with Korea's lack of global competitiveness.

WHO ARE THE IDEAL CANDIDATES FOR THE NON-GNP PARTIES?

14. (C) Political Science Professor Jaung Hoon from Chung-Ang University made his case for former Seoul National University President Chung Un-chan as the most viable presidential candidate for the progressive side (see reftel). Jaung said that Chung had a strong economic vision, exemplified by his previous role as an advisor to the Bank of Korea. Economic issues were still closely linked to regionalism and Chung had the upper hand in this area as well, hailing from the Chungcheong Province. Even if he could unite Chungcheong and Jeolla Provinces, Chung would need to show that he can translate his expertise into political power. Political expert Kim Haeng countered that Chung looked good on the surface but lacked public recognition and the skills of a seasoned politician. Chung could not survive in the "evil" arena of Korean politics. Kim also discounted former PM Lee Hae-chan's prospects.

15. (C) Park broke down the progressives into three groups: Pro-Roh (led by President Roh), Anti-Roh (led by former President Kim Dae-jung) and the Sohn Hak-kyu/Chung Un-chan group. Park noted that in the third group, neither candidate was taking the initiative to gain significant support. Former Gyeonggi Province Governor Sohn should have left the GNP party sooner if he wanted to set his candidacy apart from Chung's. President Roh, on the other hand, continued to raise important issues and fight for these issues. Roh can choose to work with the GNP on some issues (FTA) and yet pursue others not in line with the GNP (inter-Korean summit). Koreans cared less about issues and more about strong leadership; hence, Roh's recent stronger polling numbers.

GNP PRIMARY

16. (C) The Ambassador queried the guests if they thought former GNP leader Park Geun-hye had any chance of defeating former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak and capture the GNP nomination, given Lee's continuing 2:1 lead in the polls. Kim responded that if a Lee scandal emerges, even a minor scandal, it could have a strong impact on his current standing as the front-runner. Hong noted that the current high levels of support for the GNP candidates were based more on individual personalities and less on policies. Given this precarious position, a candidate could quickly lose support if linked to a scandal. Professor Jaung disagreed saying a scandal would not undo Lee, since Koreans generally accepted less-than-perfect politicians.

GNP: ELECTION IN THE BAG?

17. (C) Park listed three events that, should they occur, could prevent the GNP from winning the election: Roh's resignation (highly unlikely with his rebound in public support after the FTA); dramatic change on the Peninsula (emergency situation in DPRK); or if either Lee or Park were to leave the GNP to run as an independent and thereby split the GNP vote. After the GNP candidates register with the party at the end of this month, they would be "locked in" and could not leave the party, Jaung said. Although this was the case for the candidates, lawmakers were not subject to similar constraints, Park countered. If Park won the GNP

nomination, lawmakers who supported Lee might choose to flee the party and cause a rift among GNP supporters in the public. Conversely, if Lee won, Park's supporters would not likely leave the GNP.

GNP: HOW TO CHANGE NK POLICY

18. (C) Jaung said that the GNP had a long way to go in its attempt to revise its North Korea policy. This type of change at the party level was not easy and could not happen overnight. Jaung said it was ironic that the GNP lawmakers leading the charge to revise the policy were part of the "old guard" rather than the younger generation. At the candidate level, Park had the least amount of room to change as she was known as a hardliner.

19. (C) Hong said that South Korean views on North Korea have changed dramatically in the past five years. Even before the DPRK nuclear test, South Koreans' had begun to distrust Kim Jong-il. Currently, South Korean views on North Korea were based less on ideological differences and more on humanitarian needs. As South Koreans looked for ways to help North Koreans as individuals without supporting the DPRK regime, candidates have yet to explain how they can help achieve this goal. While South Koreans look for a new vision toward North Korea, the GNP remained mired in the past.

ROH FIGHTS OFF HIS LAME-DUCK STATUS

10. (C) Kim said that President Roh took great pride in his political ability and therefore wants to ensure a strong legacy after he leaves office. Roh was less concerned with who replaced him as president and more concerned that a candidate emerge that shared his policy views. Based on this way of thinking, former PM Lee Hae-chan, Health Minister Ryu Shi-min, just-departed PM Han Myeong-sook and former South Gyeongsang Province Governor Kim Hyuk-kyu would be acceptable to him. Kim added that if Park Geun-hye wins the GNP primary in August, Roh would likely throw his support behind Han Myeong-sook, a woman, as the best candidate to contend against Ms. Park. However, if none of these candidates' fortunes rise, Roh could support Sohn Hak-kyu, Park stated. All the attendees agreed that Roh would play a large role in the elections.

FTA: NOT A FACTOR IN THE ELECTION

11. (C) Jaung identified three reasons why U.S.-ROK relations would not be an issue in the presidential election. First, the accidental killing of the two schoolgirls in 2002 triggered a strong anti-American response among the people that influenced their voting behavior. The FTA was not likely to elicit a similar emotional response. Second, there was a different mood in the ROK in 2007, with less focus on nationalism and more concern for economics and job creation. Third, President Roh wanted to keep the discussion of Korea's economy separate from FTA ratification. Park agreed with Jaung, adding that anti-FTA protests would not likely garner strong support. Korea recognized a need to grow and expand, and most Koreans thought the FTA provided an opportunity for growth.

12. (C) Kim echoed Jaung's comments and said that the victims in 2002 were young schoolgirls. The only "victims" of the FTA might be farmers. Although they might be vocal, farmers do not have a central base of power. Looking at history, the Korea-Chile FTA yielded fair protections and assistance for groups disaffected by the FTA. Many in Korea recognized that the agriculture sector was not competitive and realized it was time for a change.

DITTO FOR NORTH-SOUTH SUMMIT

¶13. (C) Jaung speculated that even if a North-South summit were held before the election, it would not have a strong impact on the elections. Following the North's nuclear test, there was little room for North-South negotiations outside of the Six-Party Talks. In order for the summit to be considered a success, it would have to go above and beyond the 2000 summit and President Roh was not in a position to offer broad concessions to the DPRK. Given the limited agenda possible for the summit, it could not drastically change the political landscape in the months preceding the December election.

VERSHBOW